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Woman's Place
in
Chinese History

By HU SHIH

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DR. HU SHIH, author, scholar and diplomat, born at Shanghai, Kiangsu, December 17, 1891, comes from an old Anhwei family. His father, who was a scholar of high attainment and was known for his geographical explorations and researches, died when Hu Shih was only three years old. He was brought up by his mother to whom, he says, he owes everything.

In 1910, he passed the government examination for an indemnity scholarship and was sent to America. He first entered Cornell University in the College of Agriculture, and was later transferred to the College of Arts and Science, where he devoted himself to English literature, political science, and philosophy. He was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1913 and was awarded the Hiram Corson Prize for his essay on Robert Browning in 1914. After his graduation in 1914, he continued his studies in philosophy and was given a graduate scholarship at the Sage School of Philosophy in Cornell University.

In 1915, he went to Columbia University, where he remained for two years. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on *The Development of Logical Method in Ancient China.* It was during these two years that he gradually developed his ideas of a radical reform in Chinese literature. These ideas were later formulated into an article entitled *Suggestions for the Reform of Chinese Literature* which was simultaneously published in *La Jeunesse* and the *Chinese Students Quarterly.* This article formed the first manifesto of the "Literary Revolution" and its historical place was only superseded by another article of his entitled *A Constructive Revolution in Chinese Literature* (*La Jeunesse,* April, 1918), which embodied the results of mature reflection and fruitful experimentation. Dr. Hu is the first Chinese poet to devote himself to writing poetry exclusively in the spoken language. He has published over a hundred poems in the vulgate which he calls "experimental poetry." It is to his satisfaction that through his efforts the "vulgar tongue" of the people was recognized as "the national language" of China and used throughout the country as the new medium of education and literature.

In 1917 he became professor of philosophy at the Peking National University and in 1922 dean of the department of English Literature. "Philosophy," as he is fond of saying, "is my life work and literature is my hobby." In 1918, he published a

course of lectures on the Philosophy of the Mo School and in 1919, the first volume of his *History of Chinese Philosophy.* In 1925, he was invited by the British Government to serve on the Advisory Committee on the British China Indemnity. He went to England in 1926 and re-visited America in 1927. In 1928 he became President of the China National Institute at Woosung. In 1930 he moved back to Peiping to undertake the editing of a series of Chinese translations of European classics and history and became dean of the College of Letters of the National Peking University and chairman of the Translation Committee of the China Foundation for the Promotion of Education and Culture. Collected Essays were published in 1920, 1924, 1930, and 1936, forming fourteen volumes in toto. Since 1931, he has been chairman of the China Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations, and was chairman of the Chinese Delegation to the 1931, 1933, and 1936 Conferences of the Institute. In 1933, he was Haskell Lecturer at the University of Chicago, which in 1934 published his lectures under the title *Chinese Renaissance.*

In 1936, he was awarded the degree of Litt.D. by Harvard University at its Tercentenary celebration. He also received LL.D. from the University of Hongkong (1935), Columbia University (1939), the University of Chicago (1939), and the University of California (March, 1940). Also Duke University, Clark University, Wesleyan University, Brown University and Yale University, June, 1940. He received L.H.D. from the University of Southern California (1936) and D.C.L. from Union College, June, 1940. Dr. Hu is correspondent Member and Councilor of the Academia Sinica, Member of the Prussian Academy of Science, Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (Boston), and Member of the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia).

From 1932 to 1937, he edited and published *The Independent Critic,* a weekly review of liberal opinion. From September, 1937, to July, 1938, he traveled and lectured in the United States and Canada. He was appointed Chinese Ambassador to the United States in September, 1938.

He married Miss Kiang Tung-shiu in December, 1917, and has two sons.

THERE is a general impression that the Chinese woman has always occupied a very low place in Chinese society. The object of this paper, however, is to try to tell a different story, to show that, in spite of the traditional oppression, the Chinese woman has been able to establish herself a position which we must regard as a fairly exalted one. If there is a moral to this story, it is that it is simply imposible to suppress women, — even in China.

I shall begin with these interesting lines from the *Book of Odes,* which is the richest and most authentic source of materials for our study of the social life of ancient China before the 8th Century B.C.:—

> When a son is born,
> Let him sleep in the bed,
> Clothe him with fine dress,
> And give him jades to play with.
> How lordly his cry is!
> May he grow up to wear crimson
> And be the lord of the clan and the tribe!
>
> When a daughter is born,
> Let her sleep on the ground,
> Wrap her in common wrappings,
> And give her broken tiles for her playthings.
> May she have no faults, nor merits of her own;
> May she well attend to food and wine,
> And bring no discredit to her parents!

This frank partiality to sons and neglect of daughters does not require any apology or comment. It is simply a sociological and anthropological fact which womankind has always had to face in every part of the world. It is against such a hostile background that woman has had to struggle and slowly win her position in the family and in the larger world.

NOTE: This paper was read in 1931 before the American Association of University Women in Tientsin, China. A summary of it was read at a meeting of friends of Ginling College for Women sponsored by Mrs. Dwight Morrow, Mrs. Louis F. Slade, Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. and others on December 5, 1940, at the Cosmopolitan Club in New York City. The paper is now printed as it was written nine years ago.

H. S.

Even in ancient China, women were playing an important part in political life. Confucius told us that, of the ten builders of the Chou Empire, one was a woman. He did not mention who she was, nor what she did. But in those ancient odes which sang the early history of the Chou people before its eastward migration and conquest, we read high tributes paid to the great women who helped to make their race great. Indeed the poet-historians traced the origin of this race to a virgin woman who, through an immaculate conception, gave birth to Hou Tsi who taught his people the art of agriculture and became the founder of a great race and a great dynasty. Probably women enjoyed a peculiarly high position among this western people. For, in their quasi-historical poems, their great rulers were almost always mentioned together with their wives: the Tai Wang migrated with his wife; Wang Chi's marriage with Tai Jen was celebrated in one of the odes; and Tai Szu, Wen Wang's consort, was praised more than once in these poems. Tai Szu gave birth to ten remarkable sons of whom one conquered the Yin empire and founded the Chou Dynasty which lasted almost 800 years, and another was the Duke of Chou, a great general and statesman.

But in the later history of the Chou Dynasty, the part played by the women did not seem to be always beneficial. The Western Empire fell to the hands of the Barbarians in 721 B.C. and history attributed its downfall to the work of a woman, Pao Szu. Thus the poets sang:

> Glorious was the Chou House,
> It was Pao Szu who ruined it.

Authentic history did not tell us how she did it, but she must have been a truly wonderful woman to be able to ruin a great dynasty. For the poets said in another ode:

> The wise man founded the city,
> But the wise woman destroys it.
> Alas! this wise woman,
> A bird of evil omen is she!
> A woman with a long tongue
> Is surely a stepping stone to ruin.
> Disaster does not descend from Heaven,
> It comes from Woman.

This is a condemnation of woman, but it is at the same time a clear indication of the important role played by women in those days. Woman must occupy a very important position before she can ruin a city or a nation.

Throughout Chinese history, there were many great women whose political achievement was not merely due to their status as Empresses or Empress-dowagers. An ordinary person with no marked talents can achieve nothing even though she is placed in most exalted positions of the empire. But these Chinese women did honor to the positions they occupied in history. Such was the Queen-Regent of Ts'i who reigned for almost 40 years and whose sagacity in internal government and diplomacy kept the Kingdom of Ts'i out of the devastating wars which ruined the nations in the third century B.C. She was once asked to solve the puzzle of unchaining a chain of jade rings. She took a hammer and broke the chain with the exclamation: "I have solved it!"

In the founding of the Han Empire which lasted four hundred years, two women played very important parts. The Empress Lü (died 180 B.C.), wife of the Founder of the Dynasty, came from the common people and had no education. But she was a woman of great shrewdness and capable of most decisive and brutal action. It was she who murdered Han Hsin and Peng Yueh, the two great generals whose power could threaten the safety of the Empire. The other woman was the Empress Tou (died 135 B.C.) who also came from the people and was in power for 45 years. She was a believer in Lao-tse's political philosophy of Non-interference and required all her children and grandchildren and her own clansmen to study the works of Lao-tse and other Taoist philosophers. Throughout the long reign of her husband and her son, the imperial policy was one of *laissez faire* and strict economy which allowed the people to recuperate from the effects of long wars and to develop their own resources. At the end of her reign, the Empire had attained the height of general prosperity and the government had endeared itself to the people, so that it was possible for her grandson, Wu Ti, to carry out his policy of construction and expansion and to build up an empire of greater China.

In the most glorious days of the T'ang dynasty, a great woman, the Empress Wu Chao, ruled over the empire for 45 years (660-705), during a part of which period she actually

declared herself, not merely Empress-Regent, but Emperor of her newly founded Dynasty of Chou and reigned of her own right for 16 years. She was a woman of great literary talent and political genius, and her long reign was marked by territorial expansion and cultural advancement.

I shall not go on enumerating the empresses who ruled vast empires, nor the imperial favorites who ruined great dynasties. I think I have said enough to show that the Chinese woman was not excluded from political life and that she has played no mean role in the long history of the country.

II

IN the non-political spheres of life, the Chinese woman, too, has achieved positions of honor and distinction. The greatest honor goes to Ti Yung, of the family of Chuen-yu, who was responsible for the abolition of corporal tortures under the Han Empire. Her father, who was one of the greatest physicians of the age, had been unjustly accused and was to be subjected to bodily tortures. As he had five daughters and no son, the old doctor, on his way to prison, turned to the girls and said: "It has been my misfortune to have only daughters and no son, and I have no one to help me in time of need." Ti Yung, the youngest of his five daughters, resolved to help her father and went to the Capital where she petitioned to the Emperor offering herself as a slave in the Imperial Court to redeem her father from the deadly tortures. Her petition touched the heart of the benevolent emperor Wen Ti who issued in 167 B.C. his most famous edict ordering the abolition of all the worse forms of corporal punishment.

In the world of scholarship and literature, Chinese women have always made important contributions. In the early decades of the Han Dynasty, when the ancient classics were transmitted through verbal teaching, a woman was responsible for the preservation and transmission of the text of one of the classics, the *Book of History*. Three hundred years later, when the great historian Pan Ku died in imprisonment (92 A.D.) and his monumental *History of Han* was left unfinished, it was a woman, his sister Pan Chao, who was requested by the Imperial Government to continue the work and bring it to completion.

It was she who taught the great scholar Ma Yung to read the *History of Han,* thereby publishing it to the world. Pan Chao was invited to become the teacher of the Empress and the other ladies of the Court. When the Empress Teng became Regent (105-121), she was a kind of political adviser to her. Of her preserved works, the *Lessons for Women* in 7 chapters is best known. In these chapters, she taught the virtue of humility, but she also advocated the education of women. "The gentlemen of to-day," said she, "who educate their sons only and ignore the instruction of their daughters, have failed to understand the proper relationship between the sexes. According to tradition, the boys are taught to read books at the age of eight and will have acquired some knowledge by the age of 15. May we not do the same thing for the girls?" These words sound very mild today, but it must have required much moral courage to utter them in the year 100 A.D.

Of all the literary women in Chinese history, the most famous one was Li Ch'ing-chao, a native of Tsinin and wife of the scholar Chao Ming-ch'eng. She was born in 1081 and died about 1140. Both her father and mother being talented writers, she grew up in an atmosphere of culture and refinement. She wrote well both in prose and in verse, but was particularly noted for her Tz'u or songs written to popular airs. Hers was an age of songs; but she was very severe in her criticism of the greatest poets of the time. Her own songs, of which only a few scores have been preserved, were highly praised by her contemporaries; Hsin Chia-hsien, the greatest master of the Tz'u, openly admitted that he was sometimes imitating the style of Li Ch'ing-chao.

Li Ch'ing-chao was probably one of the most striking personalities among the Chinese women of historical fame. She was always frank and never hesitated to write of her real life with all its love, joy and sorrows. As an example of her frankness, I quote these sentences from her preface to her book on a game of chance which was then in vogue:

> "I love gambling. I am so fond of all forms of gambling that I can easily forego sleep or forget my food. And I always win, be the stake large or small. Why? Because I know the games well. Ever since the War and our migration to the South, frequent traveling under most trying circumstances has scattered all our gambling sets, and I have rarely played. But I have never ceased to think of the games."

With the same candor she wrote her "Second Preface" to the "Catalogue of Bronze and Stone Inscriptions" compiled by her scholarly husband. As this preface gives us a most charming picture of the intimate life of a happily married couple, I quote a few paragraphs to show the place of an educated wife in a scholarly family: —

> "When we were married in 1101, my husband was 21, and was still a student at the National University. Both our families being poor, we lived a very frugal life. On the 1st and 15th of every month, my husband had leave of absence from the University to come home. He would very often pawn his belongings to get 500 cash, with which he would walk to the Market at Hsiang-kuo Monastery and pick up rubbings of ancient stone inscriptions. These, together with some fresh fruits and nuts, he would carry home and we would enjoy together the edibles and the ancient rubbings, forgetful of all our troubles in this world.
>
> "In later years when my father-in-law became prime minister, and a number of influential friends were in a position to loan us rare books to copy, our interest in these antiquarian objects was greatly deepened and we often took great trouble and sometimes suffered privation in order to buy a rare manuscript, a fine painting, or an ancient bronze vessel. I remember once during the Ch'ung-ning Era (c. 1105) we were offered a painting by Hsu Hsi for sale at the price of 200,000 cash. Although a son of a prime minister, my husband found it difficult to pay such high price. We kept the painting for two days and had to return it to the owner. For several days we could not overcome our sense of regret and disappointment.
>
> "When my husband became prefect of two prefectures, he spent practically all his income on books and antiques. When a book was bought, he and I would always read it together, mending the text, repairing the manuscript, and writing the captions. And when a painting or a bronze vessel was brought home, we would also together open it, play with it, study its merits and criticize its defects. Every evening we studied together till one candle was burned up. In this way our collection of books surpassed all other collections in the country because of this loving care which my husband and I were able to give to it.
>
> "It was my good fortune to be endowed with a very good memory. Every evening after supper, we would sit together in the Kwei-lai Hall and make our own tea. We would wager against each other that such and such a quotation was to be found on a certain page in a certain chapter of a certain book. We must number the exact line, page, chapter and volume, and then check them from the book shelves. The winner was re-

warded by drinking the first cup of tea. But when one of us did win, one was so happy that one's hand trembled with laughter and the tea would spill all over the floor. So the first cup was rarely drunk.

"We were resolved to grow old and die in such a little world of our own."

Here in this beautiful picture of the domestic life in the early years of the 12th century, we see absolute equality, intellectual companionship and cooperation, and a little world of contented happiness. The picture is too good to be true of most Chinese families; indeed it is too good to be true of most families anywhere, in the east or in the west. But it is a most interesting human document which tells us that at least some Chinese woman once occupied a place which may make some of us modern people feel not a little envious.

III

THE question is often asked, How many women in old China may be said to have received an education? What proportion of the women had access to this literary education?

This question cannot be satisfactorily answered. It varies with the educational opportunities of the different families and with the different localities. A family with a literary tradition usually gave to its women some rudiments of a literary education; while it takes some strikingly exceptional genius to pick up a knowledge of reading and writing in a poor and unlettered family. Moreover, it is safe to say that women born in the lower Yangtse Delta had a better chance to an education than those born in the other provinces. Again, there seems to have been a gradual spread of the practice of educating the women, beginning probably with the invention of the printed book in the ninth century, and becoming more widely spread during the last four hundred years when the "literary-talented woman" (ts'ai nü) of the popular novels gradually came to be accepted as an ideal for women.

About ten years ago, Mrs. Ch'ien Hsün, wife of a former Chinese Minister to Rome, published a "Bibliography of Works by Woman Writers during the Last Three Hundred Years." This lady of 70 years had spent more than ten years in compiling this work and I was asked to write an introduction to it.

I tried to make a statistical analysis of its contents and found the results most interesting and instructive. In the first place, this bibliography tells us that there were 2310 women in the last three hundred years who had written, and most of them had published, works in the field of literature. This number in itself is a revelation to me. Secondly, I have classified these lady writers according to their birthplaces and obtained the following results: —

Kiangsu	748	32.3%
Chekiang	706	30.5%
Anhui	119	5.1%
Fukien	97	4.2%
Hunan	71	3 %
Kiangsi	57	
Chihli	51	
Shantung	44	
Manchu	42	
Kuangtung	38	
Hupei	20	
Szechuen	19	
Honan	18	
Kuangsi	15	
Shansi	13	
Shensi	10	
Kweichow	10	
Chinese Banners	10	
Yunnan	6	
Kansu	4	
Unclassified	212	
Total	2310	

Thus Kiangsu and Chekiang had the highest percentage, each coming very near to one-third of the total. These two provinces plus Anhui make more than two-thirds of the total. Kiangsu, Chekiang, Anhui, Fukien and Hunan occupy fully three-quarters of the total number. These proportions correspond almost exactly to the ratio of geographical distribution of male authors and of historical personages which has been worked out by other scholars for the same period. All this shows that Mrs. Ch'ien's bibliography was representative of cultural distribution among the female population in the country.

Thirdly, we must note that, out of the 3000 works listed, about 99 per cent is poetry. There were a few works on mathe-

matics, one on medicine, half a dozen in the field of history, and about a dozen in classical and philological research. This again is quite significant in showing that the education which these women received was purely literary and that the spirit of critical historical research which characterized the age left no marked influence on the educated ladies. They read and wrote poetry, because it was considered respectable for ladies to be able to do so. Most of these educated ladies learned to paint pictures, and some of them became accomplished artists. That, too, was a part of the literary education.

To confirm Mrs. Ch'ien's investigations, I may point out that the number of woman writers of poetry in the last three hundred years is really amazing. As far as I know, there have been three important anthologies of poems written by women during this period. The first anthology was made in 1831 and contained 933 names; the second was a supplement made in 1835 which listed 513 names; and the third was made by Mrs. Ch'ien Hsün in 1918 and contained 309 names. The three anthologies together furnish us with a list of 1755 poetesses. Besides these anthologies of poems in more or less regular metres which we call "shih," there are other anthologies of songs of irregular lines which are written to existing tunes and which are known by the name of *tz'u*. Most of the women who wrote *shih* also wrote *tz'u*. Mr. Hsu Tsi-yu, a well-known collector of books, has recently published a collection of one hundred complete works of one hundred women songwriters of this period; and in addition, he has published an anthology of 2045 songs by 783 women of the last three hundred years.

IV

IT may be asked, What good has all this literary education done to the Chinese women? Has it ever led them to revolt against foot-binding? Has it given the women an opportunity to be economically more independent? Has it really elevated their position in the family or in society?

It is true that the literary education for women has not led them to revolt against foot-binding, just as 700 years of rational philosophy has not opened the eyes of Chinese thinkers to the horrors of such a perverse and cruel form of "beautifying"

their women. Nor has this superficial education enabled the women to become economically more independent, although not a few well-known woman artists could sell their painting and calligraphy at a fairly high price. It was considered not highly reputable for good artists to write or paint for pay; and it was only in extreme cases of necessity that educated ladies of good families condescended to sell their pictures or writings.

Nevertheless, this literary education, however superficial and unpractical, has had the good effect of elevating the position of the women. In a country where educated men are rare, educated women are even more scarce and are therefore more respected. Moreover, this literary education gave them a key at least to book knowledge which, while it may not lead to emancipation or revolution, probably made them better wives and better mothers. It is not always true that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." A little knowledge is much better than no knowledge at all.

In particular, this literary education has had tremendous value in enabling the women to become better teachers to their own children. This is invariably true of Chinese girls who were rarely taught in schools together with the boys, and who would have a better chance for education if their mothers could teach them the rudiments of reading and writing. It is therefore safe to say that the comparatively wide spread of education for Chinese women during the last three hundred years has been largely the work of the educated women themselves.

And history is full of evidences of the importance of women's education in the lives of their sons. Many a great man in Chinese history received his early education from his mother. The sage Mencius owed his early training to his mother whose story has become proverbial. The great statesman and scholar Ou-yang Shiu (died 1072) lost his father at the age of four and was taught by his widowed mother who, having no money to buy paper and brush, used reeds to write characters on the ground for her son to read. The great Ku Yen-wu (died 1681), the founder of modern critical scholarship in the last three centuries, told us that his virgin mother who lost her fianceé on the eve of their wedding and lived a life of widowhood with her adopted son, was responsible for his early training in historical knowledge and in the love for the Chinese nation. When the Manchus had conquered the Ming Empire and Manchu

troops were approaching her native place, she resolved to die for her country and killed herself by starving 15 days. She died the day before her city was taken by the Manchus, and left her last instruction to her adopted son that he must not accept office or honor under the alien conquerors. Ku Yen-wu lived 36 years under the new regime, but refused to have anything to do with the new government. He was one of the few great spiritual fathers of Chinese nationalism that ultimately brought about the downfall of the Manchu rule in China.

Thus has China been rewarded by her women for the little education they had received. Against all shackles and fetters, the Chinese woman has exerted herself and achieved for herself a place in the family, in society, and in history. She has managed men and governed empires; she has contributed abundantly to literature and the fine arts; and above all she has taught and moulded her sons to be what they have been. If she has not contributed more, it was probably because China, which certainly has treated her ill, has not deserved more of her.